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ABSTRACT

Anthological projects, in which students gather and produce material for a group product (e.g., class newspapers, magazines, radio shows), can reawaken students' interest in English and benefit all ability levels. The novelty of the projects and the promise of tangible results initially motivates the students, and their involvement and the criticism of their peers keeps them working once they begin. Although anthological projects must be interspersed with more traditional English work to insure the students' mastery of basic skills, the interest, experience in writing and reading, and the motivations for activities in the projects carry over to the less inspiring requirements of the curriculum. (A book, "English by Project," student and teacher editions, by Trevor Johns and Norman Hendry, is forthcoming from Heinemann Educational Books, London.) (LH)

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The Anthological Project

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After the introduction of the comprehensive system in Montrose Academy at the beginning of session 1967-68, the first year consisted of six common-course classes, three of boys and three of girls, each class containing 30-33 pupils: in addition, there was a small mixed class following a modified course. Pupils were allocated to the six common-course classes on a random alphabetical system, and to the modified course after consultation with the head teachers of the feeder primary schools. Early in the session, we found, by various types of testing, that each class showed not only a wide range of ability in English, but a remarkable similarity in quality.

It was obvious that the traditional methods of running first year English would now no longer work, and that some new approach would have to be developed to cater for the great variety in ability, home and school background in every class. In these circumstances, we decided to embark on anthological projects, in the hope that they might provide an answer to at least some of our problems. Our first attempts were very tentative indeed. In this department we are all teachers of fairly long academic experience, and the prospect of opening the floodgates to a rush of what we realised would be new and quite unfamiliar experiences caused us many qualms and some searching of conscience. We found, to our astonishment and delight, that the anthological projects did far more than we had expected of them. As a result, for the current session, 1968-69, we have worked out in some detail a series of anthological projects for first year, ranging from the rather " bitty " factual projects of September to an attempt at a theme study project in the summer of 1969, involving mainly creative and personal writing.

Our first year's work was largely experimental, of course. A full list of the projects is given as an appendix.

As we soon realised that it would be an impossible drain on our reserves of nervous energy to engage in a continuous series of projects, we arranged for " rests " of two or three weeks between projects. Further, we decided

that one danger of doing projects exclusively in the project weeks would be that pupils would read very little, if anything. We therefore worked at projects for four periods only (out of seven) during each project week. We regarded six weeks, or twenty-four periods, as the maximum time we should allocate to any one project, although a less ambitious project could be completed in twelve to sixteen periods. In the current session, 1968-69, we estimate that we shall spend one-third of our total time in first year on projects, i.e. 24 weeks of 4 periods per week, producing three six-week projects, one four-week project and one two-week project. The rest of the time will be spent on reading and language work. From last year's experience, we expect to be able to read in the " unallocated blocks " and the " rests," most of two books of modern one-act plays, most of two books of short prose extracts, a large number of poems both traditional and modern and ten home readers. There is still time for composition and language, based on the projects; this work, therefore, will not be the same in all classes, and should have more relevance than a course book. We use course books as source material. In this way we feel that we have evolved a fairly reasonable balance in the content of the first year work.

In doing anthological projects last year, we found ourselves faced with a vast amount of typing, duplication and collation for publication. While we did manage to cope with this, we feel that the further development of such work in English will depend on how much auxiliary help we can obtain for the purely mechanical processes. The employment of teaching auxiliaries for this would free English teachers for the work they are trained and equipped to do—in the classroom.

It has been argued by many that the main danger in the common-course system is that pupils of first-rate ability will not be worked hard enough, and will tend to be idle while the others catch up. Certainly, any teacher tackling projects must be prepared for a great outburst of energy from these good pupils, who will produce, very quickly, masses of interesting writing of high standard. The only answer to the problem is to prepare a continued series of difficult assignments for these pupils, who demand to be busy, and need to be. If this is not done, they will certainly waste time. Further, they will tend to over-organise their groups, and will do some of the other pupils' work for them, so that the poorer pupils in reality will do rather less than they should. It is difficult to prevent intelligent, self-confident pupils from involving themselves deeply in work in which they become interested. We have found, for example, from a study of this year's second year, that the less able pupils, now in classes of their own in English, have to be fed with project material to a greater degree than we expected, simply because, in their first year, they were caught up in group situations where to some extent their own inferior productions were masked by the contributions of the more intelligent.

At the other end of the ability scale, however, we found that the least competent pupils gained a great deal. They were now involved in a classroom or group situation where even their minimal contributions could find a place. They developed a pride in the work of the groups to which they belonged. They became less inhibited, more willing to participate in the teaching situation in a mixed ability class.

It is, of course, the average pupils who cause the greatest concern. In our view they benefited from the informal atmosphere of project work; they found that working for some visible end-product was interesting; they understood what they were working for. They saw, perhaps for the first time, the purpose of various exercises in England that had previously appeared to them to be merely *ex cathedra* pronouncements, dimly understood. Within the English classroom they became part of situations that seemed to have some point, some relevance. As a result, I feel that they will find the senior work for the external examinations more meaningful.

Unlike science and the languages, for example, English in first year does not offer pupils the stimulus of a new field of study. They have been " doing English " for years. We have found that project work right at the start of the session does much to create a new interest in an old subject and, further, assists pupils to settle down into a new environment. Montrose Academy takes pupils from at least eight primary schools of widely different character, so that many feel lonely and lost for the first few weeks. We feel that the work they do in projects improves their morale, gives them a sense

of belonging, brings them into contact with teachers in a friendly, informal atmosphere, encourages them to work together, and helps them to get to know each other in what must seem to many a formidable environment. The sixteen periods we spent on projects in September of this year have more than justified themselves, and now that we are half-way through our second projects, we are reaping the benefit. In the "unallocated blocks," for example, pupils are accepting, with interest, lessons on punctuation of dialogue, letter writing, etc., that have arisen out of the project situations. In former years, such lessons, while being accepted, of course, did not appear to have much relevance; they were simply part of some course in English organised by the English department.

If I were asked to evaluate the worth of anthological projects in first year, I should say that they improve class tone; pupils work better, they work harder, they produce more writing of good quality. They become more self-confident, less tense in the classroom situation, much more willing to co-operate, much more ready to work at home. Indeed, they frequently come to ask if they may finish work at home. In short, they become better people. I should not argue that they become better writers of formal English than they did under the more traditional approach. On the other hand, they write a great more, and write much more honestly and naturally, so that we have more material to work with. We have perhaps too much, but most of it has a tone of sincerity and interest that is new and refreshing. There is, too, rather less parental influence on their writing; parents are generally outside the situation that the pupil is trying to develop.

Again, what these projects have done is to redress to some extent the imbalance that has existed for far too long between written and spoken English. Now we use the tape recorder almost daily, with the result that pupils lose their fear of it. Many of the projects demanded much role playing, where pupils invented imaginary situations and characters and recorded them on tape, throwing themselves into the fantasies they created, with intelligence, vigour and an astonishingly un-Scottish lack of reserve. It was all great fun, of course, but it was also a lot more; it developed imagination, it widened appreciation of character, it produced involvement. Of course, it was generally overdone, but this was better than not being done at all. Pupils lost the fear of their own voices; they became willing to stand up and talk extempore and at length; they began to be critical of their own and others' performances; they became eager to try again and again to get the effects they wanted, not only by oral practice, but by rewriting material. Now, in second year, they have attained a good standard of relaxed confidence in speech situations. They invent dialogue and deliver it with the appropriate tone and accent, and get pleasure out of working at it. We have not attempted to put over a course of lessons in speech training. We do, of course, correct major errors, but consider that the value of role playing is something much more important than the acquisition of arbitrary standards of "proper" English.

Now that we are dealing with our first set of "project" pupils promoted to second year, we are faced with the task of doing rather more formal teaching than we did in first year. We have to bear in mind that these pupils are beginning to prepare for terminal examinations, where they will be judged to a large extent on their mastery of the formal elements in English. As I have not claimed that these pupils have been improved as writers of formal English by their first year projects, we have still a long way to go. But what emerges, to my surprise, is that these pupils are more keenly interested in the intricacies of language than I should have expected. They question more freely, they ask for explanations more often, they offer examples and parallels, even when we are discussing what have been considered the more arid stretches of the curriculum. I am coming round to the view that the object of first year English should be to get the pupils to write and keep on writing. The second year is the time for shaping, for detailed examination of points of language. Now that these pupils are more mature, they find it more comprehensible. Their own writing at length in the first year has shown them something of the problems; they are now more willing to listen to the answers. In the old system, they did not write enough to realise that such problems existed.

One feature of project work that we found it difficult to adjust to at first was the constant bustle in the classroom, the "working noise" as it has been called. We soon grew accustomed to it, and it no longer worries us. Often we

found that the most vociferous arguments in the classroom concerned the projects themselves. Disciplinary problems decreased. Pupils were on the whole more involved with their work, because, for one thing, they were producing material that their fellow pupils would see, and criticise with devastating frankness.

Again, we were distrustful of the " group " as a teaching technique and, indeed, we are not yet completely convinced. We found it less difficult than we had anticipated, and were gratified by the good effect it had on class tone. There is now some anxiety to work well for the credit of the group. A kind of group discipline evolved here and there; many a refractory pupil has been told in language that I should hesitate to use in the classroom that he should settle down and get on with it.

After a year's experience of anthological projects of various kinds, both written and oral, I have revised some of the conclusions I had come to earlier. I now consider that detailed assignments of work at the very start of the project are not really necessary; indeed, they may inhibit the more imaginative pupils. My feeling is now that a project should be presented to a class in the broadest terms, with fairly general assignments being given to the groups. If the project captures the imagination of the pupils, suggestions for further development will soon come in. These " spontaneous assignments " are often much more valuable than those laid down by the teacher, and they can generally be fitted into the project, somewhere. My own method now is to stop work on the project at the end of, say, the fifth period, to allow time to be spent on language work, and to enable me to look at the project in detail. Some new directions may develop at this stage, and some unsuccessful efforts be discarded. Now, too, is the time to map out fairly difficult and detailed assignments for the better pupils. This stock-taking and trimming usually results in a better production.

Pupils doing anthological projects do not mind working on them at home. They willingly prepare stencils and illustrative material for magazines, and write out fair copies of corrected rough drafts. They consult books of reference, and eagerly interview business and professional people in the town in search of material. All this makes English more enjoyable and meaningful; it is no longer a subject to be learned only from a course book.

An anthological project, properly run, is not designed to be a collection of factual material, painstakingly amassed and lovingly illustrated. It is an exercise in living.

Anthological projects attempted
November 1967 — November 1968

1. Six class magazines of 20/25 pages each—mixture of " recording " writing on hobbies, pets, etc., and some creative writing in poems, plays, stories, letters and editorial material. Handwritten, Banda duplicated.
2. Twelve radio programmes of 10-15 minutes each—produced on a house basis—containing interviews, commentaries, news, serial plays, stories, etc.
3. One full-scale radio programme of 50 minutes, on a class group organisation, with a 47-page script and a small *Radio Times* magazine. Aim—role-playing.
4. One full-scale magazine project "Teenview," produced by class groups, of 75 F/cap pages —mainly recording writing, but some creative material.
5. A series of plays for radio on a given theme: a long-term experiment — resulting in one radio play selected from all the work done.
6. Several imaginary community projects: (1) a village, of several families represented by groups—family relationships—a disaster and its effects; (2) a wall newspaper (not completed); (3) a ship's crew on a world voyage (not completed); (4) a hospital—taping and writing; (5) a Christmas play and concert—produced and written by the pupils.
7. September, '68—24 small magazines of 15-20 pages as introduction to method — mainly recording writing. Handwritten, Banda duplicated.
8. November, 1968 — current projects, mainly imaginary communities: a holiday camp, a wedding, caravan site, street, etc. Taped and written material.